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FILE ONLY

# Cannibalism rumors spur Nicaraguan riots

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Food shortages, igniting bizarre rumors of cannibalism in the barrios, have led to riots in Nicaragua's two principal cities, and U.S. officials consider them an indication that unhappiness with the Marxist Sandinista government is spreading beyond the middle class.

The unrest in the cities of Managua and Leon erupted last month and continued into mid-December. Severe food shortages, particularly of meat, are thought to be partly responsible for the macabre rumors.

"One common story," according to a State Department cable from the U.S. Embassy in Managua, "asserts that a 'gang of women' or a satanic

cult — numbering between 60 and 400, depending on the version — kidnap children, whose blood is extracted for an ailing Sandinista comandante and whose bodies are used as meat."

U.S. officials said the riots and strikes were significant because they were spontaneous, originated among the lower class and were largely unprovoked. While the stories of cannibalism are totally discounted as the fanciful work of runaway imaginations, they are thought to demonstrate that the barrio dwellers believe the Sandinistas are capable of such atrocities.

Previous demonstrations of popular discontent had been far smaller and confined to Nicaragua's dwin-

dling urban middle class. Moreover, that discontent was not directed at the police or other symbols of Sandinista authority, as was the case in the most recent riots.

The first attack on the Sandinista power structure took place in Managua on the night of Nov. 17, when 2,000 slum dwellers living in the Jorge Dimitrov barrio attacked and destroyed a volunteer police station. They had become enraged by the rumors of cannibalism.

The attack on the police unit was considered serious enough by Sandinista officials to warrant the personal intervention of the national police commandant, Doris Tijerino. He made "energetic calls" for calm, and blamed the trouble on "counter-revolutionary rumors" circulated by the CIA and anti-Sandinista rebels.

The government also blamed "mentally deranged parents" for reporting their children missing.

The demonstrations in Leon were provoked by the Sandinistas, who confiscated goods from peasant vendors in the city's market square because the women did not have proper licenses. The police action was part of the government's attempt to control, if not eradicate, remaining vestiges of the market economy.

The move on the vendors in Leon triggered a violent reaction from some 2,000 peasant women, but "police units swiftly and forcefully established control over the crowd," said a State Department memorandum.

In early December, workers at a sugar mill in Leon went on strike to protest government efforts to shut down their commissary, where they enjoyed cheap food. Again Managua

reacted by deploying a high-level official, Victor Tirado, one of the nine principal commanders of the ruling Sandinista national directorate.

"Efforts of Comandante Victor Tirado to resolve the situation were unsuccessful and military reserves were used to take over control of the mill and end the work stoppage," the State Department reported.

Shortages are raising tensions as Christmas approaches. An attempt to distribute scarce toys two weeks ago caused "near riots," according to the State Department, "as literally thousands of people lined up at each of the [government store] outlets."

Rumors had been circulating that the toys, of Cuban and Nicaraguan manufacture, would not be available if special cardholders did not pick them up within four days. Rumor also had it that the toys were sold to black market vendors by Sandinista officials.